“There’s Not A Hait Of The Craic” or “Whiskey In The Tae”

Manys a visitor walked into our bicycle shop. Most not into buy. Just in for the chat. Two rustic hard working young men knew Sarah my mother would always land mugs of tea on the counter. Often splashed generously with whiskey.

The men had a lorry and freelanced transporting good and building materials all around the area. They were busy men. Working day and night. Word of mouth was their means of contact and frequently my dad had contacts for them.

On one dusky evening John and Pat invited Arthur for the ride. Having a delivery to make just over the border, he could help them find the address and move their stock.

That stock was bales of hay for a farmer whose hay had blown away during a fierce storm. Readily my dad agreed knowing the next day was Wednesday. He was free.

As they made their way to the customs hut just a few miles away it was now dark. Autumn was coming to a close.

The chat and craic was fierce in that lorry. All three sitting in the front. Not a care in the world. My da was well known in the customs hut. Giving good discounts on the bicycles and their spare parts to those pleasant men. There was no custom duties to pay.

Slowing the lorry down to rest outside the hut, John and Pat began to whisper. My dad couldn’t hear as the noisy engine rattled away. A new crew of customs men were on that evening. Different officers the men did not know.

It would have been easier to go to the many side roads that were unmanned. They were often narrower and rough. Pot holes prevailed making the journey longer. More fraught. Smugglers became complacent as they slyly got to know the personalities. Who regularly waved them through.

As the mood changed, in the lorry, my dad felt the unease. A full search of the lorry began. The question “anything to declare,” was asked. “No,” John replied as he coughed with nervousness. This was most unusual. That search. Bales of hay were free from duty costs.

The two handsome young eager men were thorough. Digging deeply into the hay.

John gently opened the side door. This had Arthur wondering. The side window was already unwound. They could chat freely with the customs men.

Suddenly John and Henry bolted. Jumping quickly out they ran across the fields. Out of sight in minutes. Dad was dumbfounded.

Not knowing, when in court, that the lorry was full of

cigarettes, fuel, plus several old ‘farmers type’ rifles. He agreed to the three months jail sentence. He could not afford the penalties.

Langford Lodge Airfield, Crumlin, County Antrim was an alternative airport during the second world war. Known as ‘Europe’s Alcatraz’, ‘The Crumlin Road Jail’, ‘The Crum’ locals called was near that airport. Where dads’ sentence was served maybe because of the old rifles in the lorry. There is not “A hate of the crack,” my mother would intervene as he retold his story, my dad. Sitting with his bottle of Guinness at ‘The ceili’ in our home.

But it was all true. I believed it. Never forgot the humour with which he relayed those times.

It almost seemed he enjoyed his forced stay in that infamous jail, ‘The Crum’. We learned more snippets of his story when he was probed further.

The second world war was just about over though not declared. Belfast ‘was picking up the pieces’ after the bombing of its city. Workers were required in their hundreds. The Governor of the Crumlin Jail agreed to prisoners of lower category crimes, those in for short terms to go out in the

evenings with prison officers to help repair vital structures around the city.

As a mechanical workman, good with electrics too, he was encouraged to volunteer. So he did. Their groups mission was to keep the runway at Langford Lodge Airfield Crumlin Road free of debris and the runway lights in good repair.

Planes were still landing. Taking off from there to Biggin Hill airport in London. Though there were fewer , now the war was over. One of the evenings just at dusk, a young pilot chanced to stride towards the workers. My dad

Arthur recognised him. He was his nephew. The son of his eldest sister Kate. Kate was married to Henry Price, a brother of Vincent Price. The famous actor. They got chatting my father explaining he was soon about to be released from H.M Prison. Belfast ‘The Crum’ and all that entailed.

As they exchanged gossip and stories the guard appeared by their sides. He was a good man. Lenient, supportive, very thoughtful of people in his care.

The moon began to appear as the plane soared high into the sky. The flight quickly arriving at ‘Biggin Hill’. Landing smoothly on

the runway it cruised to a stop. Quickly an officer appeared at the window of the plane. Paperwork was exchanged, with some formality leaving young Henry free to fly back to Belfast.

Such excitement my da felt, he couldn’t express, as they again lifted off a runway. Never having been in an aeroplane before. Sitting in the cockpit he looked somewhat official in his prison uniform. It was navy. All one colour. The logo barely visible in the soft light.

Crossing the sea suddenly the plane took a dip. Then rolled over. Then climbing quickly again

spinning, turning and dipping. Flying upside down. All in quick succession with ‘his heart in his mouth’ they landed safely at the Irish airfield.

“Henry,” began my dad. “It was great to see you,” he said before saying, “I am not sure of your flying skills though”. “I will admit it was exciting but the buzz in my head is telling me different. You laughing didn’t help as I cursed and swore”.

As they parted, exchanging handshakes, they knew meeting up again would happen as they both would be free. Free from war. Free from prison. Dad would

fly again. As my mother’s mantra rang in my ears ‘There’s not a Hait of the craic,’ I knew ‘the bones of his tale’ was true. Embellished here and there. But nevertheless true.

I plan soon to visit the old Victorian Jail ‘The Crum’, I believe it has some great history. Also there is supposed to be a book. Names of inmates enrolled during those years. Maybe I will discover Arthur’s name and ‘put to bed’ my mum’s saying. Once and for all. ‘There’s not a hait of the craic.’